

Science-based group offers support

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went on social media, looking for eczema support groups.

She describes one group that she initially joined as “too radical”.

“They told me to not eat this, not eat that, and that is how I started this extreme diet,” she shares.

Hafifah, who was exclusively breastfeeding Affan at that time, lost almost 30kg within four months, eating the same limited menu the entire time.

“But it didn’t help Affan – he became worse, and my emotions also became worse and my health deteriorated.

“So I knew this was not the right way.”

One thing she observed was that when she was stressed, Affan would also become stressed, triggering a bout of scratching.

“So I managed to control my emotions, and my happy baby became happier and didn’t scratch himself,” she says.

She shares that she now takes 10-15 minutes everyday to have some “me time”, like taking a proper shower or treating herself to a DIY body scrub.

Long-term effects

Similarly, Suhazlin Anuar found that when she was calm, happy and accepting of her son’s condition, his skin condition would also improve.

Muhammad Sidqi Mateen Muhammad Muzakir, 22 months old, developed eczema when he was three months old.

“We went to see both private and public specialists, and the doctors, and even my online searches, all say that eczema cannot be cured, it can only be controlled.

“But at that time, I could not accept it, because I believed that every disease has a cure.

“Because of that, I tried all sorts of treatments, from modern to traditional,” shares the 29-year-old housewife.

Like Hafifah, Suhazlin who was breastfeeding her son also dieted, cutting out all the foods suggested by others who claimed not eating those foods would cure her son’s condition.

“The word ‘cure’ really meant a lot,” she explains.

However, not only did she lose 15kg from her original weight of 65kg, but Muhammad Sidqi’s condition also went from moderate to severe.

“After I gave up the diet – because I lost hope when it didn’t work – when I started eating all the things I supposedly couldn’t eat, my son’s recovery was faster,” she says.

“The effects of not eating certain foods, of listening to other people, of not listening to the doctor – believing in alternate ways,



(From left) Muhammad Muzakir Md Nor swinging his son Muhammad Sidqi up into the air, as wife Suhazlin watches on. Suhazlin shares that she tried everything in order to cure Muhammad Sidqi’s eczema.

rather than the doctor’s advice – are not short-term, but long-term,” she adds.

“Until now, my son has anaemia and lacks certain vitamins and minerals – he’s now on supplements given by the doctor.”

She says that he was also slow to achieve some of the normal childhood milestones, like being late to crawl.

She notes that it was better for her to just observe her son’s reaction to what she fed him and avoid those foods that seem to result in a flare-up or itchiness.

Eczema patients, she observes, can be quite different, and what triggers a flare-up in one, may not give a reaction in another.

She shares that, emotionally, it was particularly depressing and stressful to follow various alternative advice, and to be let down when their claims proved to be false.

In fact, caring for her son has taken such a toll on her that she hesitates to have another child for fear of eczema. “It is not easy to handle eczema,” she laments.

Based on science

Like Suhazlin, Prof Dr Lai Oi Ming also did not want to accept that her son’s eczema had no cure.

“When (Ker) Min Ho, my first and only child, had very severe eczema, I brought him from one doctor to another, and I started checking out social media.

“I learnt more and more about eczema, and then I realised there was no cure.

“That was something that was very, very hard for me to accept, because I considered it just a skin condition, so how can a skin condition have no cure?” shares the 51-year-old lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Faculty of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences.

To try and help her son, who is now five years old, one of the things she did was to look for eczema support groups on social media. “It is actually quite scary, what is out there,” she says.

“There are some who tell you, you cannot

use steroids (which is the main medical treatment for controlling eczema); you cannot vaccinate your child because vaccinations make the eczema worse; and you’re not supposed to eat a whole lot of foods,” she shares.

However, due to her biochemistry background, the scientific and medical papers on eczema resonated more with her, leading her to realise that the main issue with eczema is the effect it has on the skin barrier.

This eventually lead her to develop a cream with anti-inflammatory properties to help reduce the inflammation of eczema, repair the skin from beneath and prevent moisture loss due to the ineffective skin barrier. (*Treating it skin deep, Fit for life, Dec 31, 2017*)

The cream, called Remdii, is now being marketed under a start-up founded by Prof Lai, two of her postgraduate students who were involved in the research for the cream, and two of her friends from the business sector.

“During our research for the Remdii cream, my post-graduate student and I realised that almost everyone or their loved ones in the (research) group had eczema.

“So we thought, why don’t we start a support group where we actually give good, proper information that is based on medical reasoning and science?” shares Prof Lai.

However, that group, known as the Malaysia Eczema Support Group on Facebook, soon became “too out-of-control” with people coming in to sell their products and posting non-verified information.

So, Prof Lai started a new Facebook group called the Malaysia Eczema Support Community with tighter control over what can be posted on the page.

“From there, I realised that the community consists of parents of many levels of education, and when you post things that are too scientific, a lot of them don’t get it.

“So, I need to break down the information to a simpler form, and sometimes, I translate it into Malay because a lot of the members are Malay,” she says.

Aside from providing scientifically-based information, the Facebook group also aims to provide support to eczema patients and their families, and to raise awareness about eczema among Malaysians.

Prof Lai adds that what differentiates their group from other eczema support groups is that they have healthcare professionals like dermatologists and an immunologist as their advisors, who can help provide a medical perspective to their members.

Tan, Hafifah and Suhazlin are long-time members of the Eczema Support Community group.



(From left) Affan, held by Taufiq, listens as Hafifah shares the hardships they have been through, trying to come to terms with their son’s eczema.



Prof Lai with her son Min Ho, who inspired her to come up with a cream to help manage eczema. She also started a Facebook support group for eczema patients and their families.